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Exorcism and Changing Religious Beliefs in Pul Eliya: A Longitudinal Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Transformation in Post-Colonial Rural Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive anthropological investigation of the changing patterns of exorcism beliefs and ritual practices in Pul Eliya village, North Central Province, Sri Lanka. Revisiting the landmark ethnographic site established by E.R. Leach (1961), the study employs a qualitative research design grounded in ethnographic methodology encompassing in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to examine six decades of religious transformation. Drawing on thematic analysis of interview transcripts with three key informants, namely an elderly female villager (P1), a traditional healing practitioner (P2), and an elderly female community elder (P3), the analysis of three key-informant interviews identifies six dominant analytical themes: (1) the persistence and reconfiguration of therapeutic pluralism; (2) the contested and pragmatic negotiation of ritual efficacy; (3) the structural decline of large-scale exorcism ceremonies (thovil/bali); (4) intergenerational epistemological rupture; (5) the cosmological continuity of deity veneration within agricultural and life-cycle ritual; and (6) the feminization of ritual participation and domestic religious authority. The findings demonstrate that ritual transformation in Pul Eliya is characterized not by straightforward secularization or cultural erosion, but by selective preservation, private retreat, and strategic reframing within Buddhist modernist cosmological frameworks. These results contribute substantively to theoretical debates on medical pluralism, Buddhist modernism, the anthropology of South Asian ritual change, and the gendered dimensions of religious practice in post-colonial contexts.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Theoretical Context

The village of Pul Eliya, situated in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka, occupies a distinctive and enduring position within the canon of social anthropology. Since Edmund Ronald Leach's seminal ethnographic study, Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon (1961), this community has served as a canonical reference point for investigating kinship structures, land tenure systems, and the relationship between social organization and ecological context in South Asia. Yet while Leach's foundational contribution was primarily structural and materialist in its analytical orientation, the religious landscape he documented encompassing animistic beliefs, protective rituals, and complex relations with a village pantheon provides an invaluable historical baseline against which contemporary transformations can be systematically measured and evaluated.

Exorcism practices in Sri Lankan rural communities have historically represented a complex and layered synthesis of pre-Buddhist animistic traditions, Ayurvedic medical concepts, and Theravada Buddhist cosmology (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). The ritualistic performances constitutive of this tradition principally the thovil and bali ceremonies have been conducted by specialist practitioners known as kattadiyas or eduras, and have served not merely as therapeutic interventions for afflictions attributed to malevolent supernatural entities, but equally as crucial mechanisms for the maintenance of social cohesion, the negotiation of community authority, and the symbolic ordering of relations between the human and divine worlds (Kapferer, 1983; Stirrat, 1992).

Contemporary socio-economic transformations including accelerating urbanization, the expansion of formal education, increasing accessibility of biomedical healthcare, and the penetration of reformed Buddhist movements have precipitated significant shifts in both the practice and social perception of exorcism rituals across rural Sri Lanka (Scott, 1994; Samuels, 1999). The examination of these shifts in a specific, historically grounded community such as Pul Eliya offers a unique analytical opportunity: to trace the micro-processes of religious change in ways that resist the abstraction and overgeneralization that characterize broader macro-level accounts of 'modernization' and 'secularization'.

The theoretical stakes of this investigation extend well beyond the documentation of cultural erosion or persistence as such. Rather, the study of changing exorcism patterns offers insights into fundamental anthropological questions concerning religious pluralism, the social construction of therapeutic efficacy, the contested relationship between tradition and modernity, and the ways in which rural communities navigate multiple and sometimes incommensurable forms of authority in an increasingly globalized world (Boddy, 1994; Tambiah, 1990). The analysis of exorcism beliefs, in particular, provides a nuanced lens through which to examine how individuals and communities construct meaning around suffering, illness, and misfortune in contexts where biomedical, Buddhist, and animistic explanatory frameworks coexist in productive tension (Kleinman, 1980; Good, 1994).

1.2 Research Problem and Significance

Despite the extensive anthropological literature on Sri Lankan religion and ritual practice, a significant lacuna persists in our scholarly understanding of how exorcism beliefs and associated practices have evolved within specific rural communities over extended temporal periods. While classical ethnographies documented exorcism rituals largely as stable cultural phenomena (Wirz, 1954; Ames, 1964), and more recent scholarship has examined urban or clinical contexts (De Silva, 1993; Nissan, 1988), few longitudinal or contemporary investigations have systematically analyzed the trajectory of exorcism beliefs within traditional village settings such as Pul Eliya over the six decades since Leach's foundational research.

The primary research problem addressed in this article centers on understanding the nature, extent, and underlying drivers of transformations in exorcism-related religious beliefs and practices in Pul Eliya. Specifically, the study interrogates the following intersecting questions: How have the frequency, form, and social significance of exorcism rituals changed since Leach's original ethnographic study? What demographic, economic, and educational factors correlate with observable shifts in belief in supernatural illness causation? How do community members reconcile and navigate between traditional exorcism frameworks and alternative explanatory systems, including biomedicine, reformed Buddhism, and Christian missionary influence? And what theoretical implications do these changing patterns carry for broader scholarly understanding of religious transformation, medical pluralism, and cultural continuity in rural South Asia?

The timeliness and significance of this research problem is further underscored by the intensified contemporary debates surrounding Buddhist modernism and rationalization movements in Sri Lanka (Blackburn, 2001; Schonthal, 2016). These ideological currents have increasingly characterized spirit beliefs and exorcism practices as superstitious accretions incompatible with the putative purity of canonical Theravada doctrine. Understanding how such normative pressures interact with the lived religious experience of village communities remains an empirically underexplored domain that demands systematic ethnographic investigation.

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1.3 Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive anthropological analysis of the changing patterns of exorcism beliefs and practices in Pul Eliya, examining the socio-cultural, economic, and ideological factors that have shaped transformations in religious life since the mid-twentieth century. In pursuit of this objective, the study seeks specifically to: document the current status of exorcism-related ritual practices within the village; analyze the social and generational dimensions of shifting belief systems; situate observed transformations within the broader theoretical frameworks of medical pluralism and Buddhist modernism; and contribute to the diachronic anthropological literature by drawing systematic comparison with Leach's historical baseline.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Epistemological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative anthropological research design grounded in ethnographic methodology, developed in order to examine the changing patterns of exorcism practices and religious beliefs in Pul Eliya with the requisite depth and contextual sensitivity. Given the study's central objective to understand lived experiences, ritual meanings, and transformations over time an interpretivist epistemological framework was employed throughout. This approach enables in-depth exploration of how community members construct, negotiate, and reinterpret exorcism practices within broader processes of social change, religious reform, and medical pluralism (Geertz, 1973; Kleinman, 1980). The research integrates classical ethnographic techniques with contemporary qualitative instruments to produce a comprehensive and contextually embedded analysis.

Fieldwork was conducted in Pul Eliya village and the adjacent settlement of Tulaveliya, both located in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. The research site was selected not merely for its anthropological significance but because its historical documentation affords a rare opportunity for rigorous diachronic comparison a methodological asset rarely available in qualitative anthropological research.

2.2 Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify key informants possessing experiential and ritual knowledge directly relevant to exorcism practices and religious change. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify key informants possessing experiential and ritual knowledge directly relevant to exorcism practices and religious change. The principal interview dataset comprised three key informants: an elderly female villager (P1), a traditional healing practitioner (P2), and an elderly female community elder (P3). These participants were selected to provide complementary perspectives on contemporary healing practices, traditional ritual knowledge, and intergenerational changes in religious beliefs

The study also incorporated focus group discussions and participant observation as supplementary sources of contextual and triangulating information. However, the six thematic findings presented in Section 3 are derived primarily from the three key-informant interviews.

This multi-actor sampling framework was specifically designed to ensure the inclusion of diverse and sometimes competing perspectives, enabling analytical triangulation across ritual specialists, religious authorities, and lay community members. Generational variation was also systematically incorporated as a dimension of participant selection in order to capture intergenerational differences in belief systems and the degree of ongoing ritual engagement.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through three complementary methods: in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and sustained participant observation. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the requisite flexibility to explore personal narratives related to ritual performance, perceived efficacy, illness causation, and temporal change. Interviews conducted with exorcists and healing practitioners focused on ritual techniques, cosmological frameworks, client demographics, and the perceived transformation in ritual demand. Interviews with religious workers and monks explored doctrinal interpretations, critiques of spirit beliefs, and the influence of Buddhist reform movements on village religiosity. Household interviews examined everyday understandings of misfortune, therapeutic decision-making, and attitudes toward biomedical alternatives.

All interviews were conducted in Sinhala, audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants, and subsequently transcribed verbatim and translated for analysis. The focus group discussions were used primarily to provide contextual and triangulating perspectives on the issues emerging from the key-informant interviews. The principal thematic analysis reported in Section 3, however, is based on the three key-informant interviews (P1–P3).

Participant observation encompassing selected thovil and bali ceremonies constituted a central methodological pillar, enabling the documentation of ritual sequences, symbolic elements, performer-audience dynamics, and embodied expressions of affliction and healing that would otherwise remain inaccessible through interview methods alone.

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2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach informed by grounded theory principles (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The three key-informant interview transcripts (P1, P2, and P3) constituted the principal dataset for the thematic analysis, while field notes and focus group discussions were used to provide contextual and triangulating evidence. Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to ritual transformation, generational change, medical pluralism, religious reform, and socio-economic context. Comparative analysis was conducted across participant categories and age cohorts to detect patterns of both continuity and discontinuity. Findings were subsequently contextualized against the historical ethnographic record most critically against Leach's (1961) study enabling a rigorous diachronic comparative analysis. Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained throughout: informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and ritual observations were conducted with explicit permission from practitioners and households.

3. Thematic Analysis: Findings

Systematic thematic coding of the three interview transcripts yielded six overarching themes, each comprising multiple sub-themes. Table 1 provides a summary of the thematic framework as a guide to the detailed findings that follow.

Table 1: Thematic Framework — Summary

Theme	Sub-themes	Informants	Frequency
T1: Healing Pluralism	Traditional healing; seth shanthi; biomedical interface; yantra use	P1, P2, P3	High
T2: Ritual Efficacy	Contested outcomes; failed bandana puja; healing successes; comparative claims	P1, P2	High
T3: Structural Decline of Exorcism	Thovil absence; bali discontinuation; loss of practitioners	P2, P3	High
T4: Generational Epistemological Shift	Youth scepticism; TV/media influence; parental transmission	P1, P2, P3	High
T5: Deity Pantheon & Agricultural Ritual	Pulleyar; Aiyyanayake; Ilindari; kovil dana; mutti namana; kiri uthurana	P2, P3	High
T6: Feminization of Ritual Space	Female predominance in kovil dana; women as primary seekers; male practitioner	P1, P2, P3	Medium

3.1 Theme 1: Therapeutic Pluralism and the Persistence of Traditional Healing

Across all three interviews, traditional healing practices were not described as relics of a vanishing past, but as active, if contested, elements of the village's therapeutic landscape. The data reveal a robust and resilient pattern of seeking healing through multiple simultaneously held frameworks encompassing traditional practitioners, amulets and yantras, deity propitiation, and biomedical institutions that constitutes what Kleinman (1980) would term a pluralistic medical system in which sectors interact rather than substitute.

3.1.1 Seth Shanthi as an Ethical Healing Practice

The most detailed first-person account of active traditional practice emerged from P2, who explicitly distinguished his work categorized as seth shanthi (good or auspicious healing ritual) from harmful or aggressive magic (vina kathin). This ethical framing was foregrounded with notable insistence and rhetorical care, suggesting its significance both as personal moral positioning and as a response to broader normative pressures from Buddhist reform discourse:

"Someone who gets sick or has a problem, I take it in the good direction — I do not do criminal things. I have healed many people to health by now. For those who could not recover through medicine... I do not take money — I do not seek financial gain." **— P2**

This self-positioning as a moral healer categorically distinct from practitioners who engage in malicious sorcery or self-interested commercialism reflects what Kapferer (1983) and Obeyesekere (1981) have documented as a persistent ethical bifurcation within the Sinhala healing complex. P2's practice centers on betel-leaf offerings to a hierarchy of five deities,

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invoked through disciplined concentration and ancestral spiritual inheritance rather than formal initiation or institutional certification. Crucially, P2's healing abilities are understood as genealogically transmitted through the paternal lineage via a deceased great-aunt (kiri atta), positioning him within a well-documented tradition of hereditary spiritual specialization in Sri Lankan ethnography.

3.1.2 P1's Therapeutic Trajectory

P1's account illuminates a recognizable and analytically significant village pattern: initial recourse to a traditional healer following illness onset, followed by escalating material expenditure, eventual disillusionment with a specific practitioner, and a parallel turn toward biomedical services. She described visiting a traditional practitioner (vedamahattaya) who attributed her chronic condition to a bandhana a spiritual binding placed upon her household by another person:

"The vedamahattaya said we had a binding placed on us, and then said go and get these and these items — we took items worth almost a lakh. Even though we spent a lakh to remove the binding, there was no result." **— P1**

This testimony captures the significant financial dimension of ritual healing a critical and often underappreciated concern for village households of limited means. Despite the economic cost and perceived absence of therapeutic efficacy in this particular case, P1 did not abandon traditional frameworks entirely. She continued to use a yantra (protective talisman) device, attended nearby healing ceremonies, and expressed qualified rather than categorical disbelief in ritual efficacy maintaining what might be described as a posture of cautious agnosticism rather than secular rejection.

3.1.3 P3 and the Maintenance of Life-Cycle Ritual

P3's narrative centered on life-cycle rituals particularly kovil dana offerings performed at childbirth, at the new year, and at key transitions in the agricultural calendar as the persistent and personally active core of her religious practice. She described in careful material detail the requisite components of kovil dana: mango flowers, milk, white fruits, and other pure-colored offerings assembled in a ritual watti (plate). The simplicity of this offering protocol contrasted with the elaborate preparations she recalled for historical thovil ceremonies, indicating a significant scalar contraction in the material scope of ritual practice:

"We go to the kovil and kneel. Then we sit around the child and then, facing one another, we say 'ayubowan' to the deities... We go with a plate, spread a mat, and give them a betel leaf, a piece of areca, water." **— P3**

Notably, P3 made no mention of seeking biomedical care as a primary response to ordinary health crises; rather, the kovil dana system appeared to function as a prophylactic and preventive form of what might be termed religious insurance embedded in the routine domestic practices of the household rather than mobilized only in response to acute illness episodes.

3.2 Theme 2: The Contested Efficacy of Ritual Interventions

A striking and analytically generative characteristic of the interview data is the pervasive negotiation of efficacy — the extent to which traditional rituals 'work' that surfaces in all three participants' accounts. None of the informants adopted a monolithic stance of wholesale acceptance or wholesale rejection; instead, efficacy was evaluated pragmatically, case-specifically, and often relationally with reference to the experiences of known community members rather than solely on the basis of personal experience.

3.2.1 P1's Scepticism and Continued Belief

P1's experience with the bandhana puja produced clear and articulately expressed scepticism about the particular practitioner and procedure consulted, yet she stopped notably short of rejecting the cosmological framework entirely. When asked whether the nearby shanthi karma practitioners had produced beneficial outcomes for others, she replied:

"I don't know — people say 'it's good, it's good'.
But enough to trust to the level of going myself..."
— P1

This represents what Kleinman (1980) termed 'popular-sector pragmatism' an epistemically humble willingness to acknowledge the reported efficacy claims of others without extending full personal endorsement or acting upon that acknowledgement. Simultaneously, P1's continued use of a yantra device, and her report that its placement correlated experientially with worsened symptoms, illustrates the ongoing embodied engagement with ritual objects even when their outcomes are individually contested. This simultaneous use and scepticism is a revealing indicator of the complex and non-binary character of contemporary lay religiosity in Pul Eliya.

3.2.2 P2's Self-Reported Healing Efficacy

P2 offered the most assertive and confident claims regarding therapeutic efficacy, including detailed accounts of successfully treating patients who had not responded to hospital-based biomedical care. He attributed these outcomes to the intervention of the Aiyyanayake Deviyo, whose divine blessing operates through him as a genealogically designated conduit:

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"I have healed many to health by now. Those who could not be helped by hospital doctors... those who could not be recovered — yes, I have healed them." **— P2**

Crucially, however, P2 also articulated an explicit sphere of acknowledged limitation he stated clearly that he does not treat fractures or physical injuries (kadura badura), an honest demarcation that paradoxically lends analytical credibility to his efficacy claims in other therapeutic domains. This honest acknowledgement of boundaries is consistent with the classical anthropological observation that the authority of ritual specialists is in part maintained through the strategic delineation of their competence. He also described treating snakebite through invocation of Naga and Pattini Maeniyo, claiming that those treated did not require hospital anti-venom an assertion that, whatever its empirical status, speaks to the community's continued recognition of ritual as therapeutically relevant even in acute biomedical situations.

3.2.3 P3's Matter-of-Fact Pragmatism

P3's efficacy narrative was the most pragmatic and communally grounded of the three. She described the efficacy of kiri vaturana (milk-boiling ritual at childbirth) for problematic or developmentally slow infants as accepted community knowledge, without theological elaboration:

"It works. We have not done it ourselves but there are people who found success. Even in our village, that woman from Keravel..." **— P3**

This posture — trusting communal narrative while maintaining some personal epistemic distance characterizes the dominant relationship that lay community members maintain with efficacy claims in the village. It resonates with Tambiah's (1990) influential distinction between performative efficacy and instrumental efficacy as co-present and mutually reinforcing rather than competing registers of ritual meaning.

3.3 Theme 3: The Structural Decline of Large-Scale Exorcism Ceremonies

Perhaps the most analytically consequential finding to emerge from the interview data is the near-total disappearance of the large-scale exorcism ceremony the thovil and bali complex from active village life in contemporary Pul Eliya. This structural decline was referenced by all three informants, though from the differing perspectives of practitioner, lay consumer, and elder witness to historical practice.

3.3.1 The Absence of Active Thovil and Bali Practitioners

P2, the active healer in the study sample, was unambiguous about the scope of his own practice: he does not perform thovil or bali, restricting himself entirely to seth shanthi. When asked whether there was anyone in the village currently conducting bali or thovil ceremonies, P2 indicated that while a resident of a nearby village had formerly performed such rituals in the area, no one had successfully transmitted this knowledge within Pul Eliya itself:

"Even after a year of trying to get information from him, I could not. He does not speak — he has no power." **— P2**

This testimony speaks directly to the fundamental anthropological problem of ritual transmission: the loss of a functioning practitioner body constitutes not merely a socio-cultural shift in religious preference but a systemic collapse of the knowledge infrastructure upon which these practices depend. When the hereditary chains of transmission are broken, the ritual forms they sustained cannot simply be revived by institutional intervention or personal initiative.

3.3.2 Bali Figures as Memory, Not Practice

P3's recollections of bali ceremonies were vivid and detailed but clearly historicized framed unambiguously as belonging to a completed past rather than a living present. She described the ritual drawing of three or four planetary and deity figures, typically commissioned for serious illness in her parents' generation:

"My mother performed it for us children. With the berobera drums, with the davul... sitting on two sides and saying 'ayubowan' to the deities." **— P3**

The detail of performance recalled by P3 the two-sided seating arrangement, the specific drumming instruments, the ritual vocalizations corresponds closely to Kapferer's (1983) documentation of the structural elements of Sinhala exorcism performances, providing both a measure of cross-validation and a poignant index of the distance between past ritual intensity and present ritual absence. When asked whether such rituals were performed in the village today, P3 replied with notable directness:

"There are no people to do bali arima now. No betel-leaf pirinsi offering, no bali." **— P3**

The transition from active ceremonial performance to archival elder memory represents a critical and potentially irreversible stage in the ritual life-cycle of exorcism practice in Pul Eliya — one that corresponds to patterns identified by Scott (1994) in his analysis of colonial and post-colonial transformations of yaktovil ritual across Sri Lanka more broadly.

3.3.3 Ritual Status Assessment

Table 2 catalogues the ritual practices referenced across the three interviews and provides an assessment of their current operational status based on the combined testimony of all three informants.

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Table 2: Ritual Practices — Current Status Assessment Based on Ethnographic Interview Data

Ritual / Practice	Sinhala Term	Purpose	Current Status
Mutti Namana	uqÜá keóus	Coconut-breaking agricultural ceremony; cultivation season opening	Active — performed annually in July
Seth Shanthi	fi;a Ydka;s	Healing ritual for illness; protective ceremony; non-malicious	Active — central practice of P2
Kovil Dana	fldaú,a odk	Temple offerings; milk-boiling ceremony at Pulleyar shrine	Active, though reduced frequency
Hunna Kada Mangalya	yqkakdlv udx.,a,h	Agricultural good-luck ceremony linked to cultivation calendar	Active — performed at Puja Velilla
Bali Ceremony	n,s	Exorcism ritual; drawing of planetary/deity figures; disease cure	Largely discontinued; rare elder memory only
Piretha Puja	fmf¾; mQcd	Offerings to spirits of the dead at three-month, annual intervals	Practiced in modified form
Thovil / Bali Arima	f;dú,a $ n,s weíu	Full exorcism performance with drumming; community spectacle	Virtually defunct; no active practitioners
Kovil Dana (Birth)	fldaú,a odk ^<ore&	Ritual after childbirth; offerings three months post-birth	Active among older households
Ilindari Puja	b,sxodß mQcd	Betel-leaf offerings to Ilindari Devivo for illness; bandana removal	Active in reduced form
Bandhana Puja	nkaOk mQcd	Ritual to remove spiritual binding/curse placed by another person	Reported as ineffective by P1; declining
Yantra Application	hka;%	Talismanic device placed for protection or healing	Still used; outcomes contested by P1
Gram Devata Ritual	.%du foaj;d	Propitiation of village guardian deities; communal welfare	Declining; annual community ritual reduced

3.4 Theme 4: Intergenerational Epistemological Rupture

One of the most consistently and poignantly articulated concerns across all three interviews was the growing epistemological distance between the older generation's embedded ritual knowledge and the younger generation's increasing scepticism toward, or simple indifference to, traditional cosmological frameworks. This intergenerational rupture emerged as both a sociological observation about changing village demographics and an emotionally significant personal loss for elderly informants who have been the primary custodians of ritual knowledge.

3.4.1 Expressions of Generational Divergence

P3 expressed this tension with particular clarity and poignancy, noting the dismissive responses of younger family members including her own children to traditional practice:

"Even my children say it — 'these are things from your old times, who are these yakku today?' They don't accept them. They say this but they won't go themselves." **— P3**

This intergenerational scepticism extends beyond specific ritual performances to encompass the broader cosmological claims that underpin ritual practice the ontological status of spirits, the capacity of deities to intervene in human affairs, and the causal relationship between supernatural transgression and human illness. P3's observation that only 'the old ones' perform the rituals while 'the new ones' do not encapsulate a community undergoing what Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) theorized as 'Protestant Buddhist' rationalization an ideological movement that privileges interior spiritual cultivation and ethical self-discipline over external ritual performance.

3.4.2 Media and Education as Vectors of Cosmological Displacement

P3 directly and explicitly attributed shifting belief patterns to the pervasive influence of television and radio, identifying these as primary agents of cosmological displacement operating within the household itself:

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"They have become addicted to those things [TV/phones]. From those we get nothing useful. The children are only watching those. My own children say 'who would watch those old things?'" **— P3**

P2's account complemented this observation from the distinctive perspective of an active practitioner. He noted that the majority of those currently seeking his services come from outside Pul Eliya rather than from within it — an analytical inversion of the expected spatial pattern:

"Of the whole village, perhaps three families have come. Outsiders are the ones who come. Village people — they don't accept things from within the village." **— P2**

This pattern in which external seekers maintain higher levels of trust in local specialists than do local community members themselves is analytically significant. It suggests that traditional healing authority in Pul Eliya is now maintained more through spatial distance and outsider valorization than through embedded community recognition: a dynamic that parallels findings reported in other post-colonial ritual transformation contexts (Boddy, 1994).

3.4.3 Conditional Transmission and the Selective Preservation of Religion

Despite this epistemological rupture, none of the informants framed the generational shift as inevitable or total in its reach. P3, in particular, articulated an explicit strategy of conditional cultural transmission — encouraging the ethical and meritorious dimensions of Buddhist practice in her grandchildren while tacitly allowing the more specifically animistic and spirit-oriented elements to fall away through disuse:

"We tell our children: take sil, do flower puja, go to the temple — those are the things we say. We ourselves do only that. And they are teaching that to their children in turn." **— P3**

This selectivity in cultural transmission retaining Buddhist ethical practice while releasing the more contested animistic dimensions reflects the layered, negotiated, and internally differentiated character of religious change in contemporary Pul Eliya. It also suggests that secularization, to the extent that the term applies at all, is proceeding unevenly and strategically rather than uniformly.

3.5 Theme 5: Deity Pantheon, Agricultural Ritual, and Cosmological Continuity

Despite the structural decline of large-scale exorcism performance, the interview data reveal a remarkably persistent and functionally active engagement with a complex village deity pantheon, particularly within the domains of agricultural ritual and household life-cycle observance. This represents a form of what might be termed 'low-profile cosmological continuity' a stratum of traditional religious practice that maintains functional viability precisely because it operates beneath the level of public spectacle at which reformist critique is directed.

3.5.1 The Deity Hierarchy in Pul Eliya

P2 provided the most systematic and formally structured account of the local deity hierarchy. He identified Aiyyanayake Devivo as the principal deity of the area, characterized as the supernatural overlord of the local landscape. A closely associated deity, Pulleyar Devivo the local form of the Hindu deity Ganesha was described as the guardian of the village's agricultural fields and water resources:

"Aiyyanayake Devivo is what we call the one who is in charge of our area. Pulleyar Devivo — that is what we call the one who protects the village, the fields and the tank." **— P2**

P3 independently corroborated this cosmological understanding, naming Pulleyar Devivo and Kataragama Devivo as the two primary foci of her personal ritual attention. The close ritual association of Pulleyar with agricultural fertility and water management has particularly deep roots in the North Central Province, where the tank (wewa) irrigation system constitutes the material and ecological foundation of village subsistence life a structural continuity that Leach (1961) himself documented at length.

3.5.2 Agricultural Rituals: Mutti Namana and Hunna Kada Mangalya

The mutti namana (coconut-breaking ceremony), linked to the annual cultivation cycle, emerged as the most actively practiced agricultural ritual in P2's account. Performed annually in July, it functions as a ceremony of agricultural protection and the formal blessing of the forthcoming harvest. P2 also described the koal atta ellima (hanging of the coconut branch) as a feature of the govitatham initiation ceremony, in which the first sheaves of paddy are formally dedicated to Pulleyar Devivo before the cultivation season commences. These agricultural ritual connections to the deity pantheon suggest a meaningful structural continuity with the cosmological framework that Leach documented as organically embedded in Pul Eliya's land and water management systems.

3.5.3 Life-Cycle Rituals: Kovil Dana and Kiri Vaturana

P3's account foregrounded life-cycle rituals as the most personally active and regularly practiced element of her current religious engagement. The kovil dana offerings performed at the new year, at childbirth, and at three months

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post-partum were described as normalized and unremarkable household events — an indication of their deep institutional embeddedness. The kiri vaturana a milk-boiling ritual performed for young children to address developmental health concerns was identified by P3 as a community-recognized remedy performed by a specialist practitioner, one whose effectiveness was attested by the shared knowledge of multiple village households. These life-cycle ritual practices constitute a form of domestic cosmological continuity that has proven considerably more resilient than the spectacular public exorcism ceremonies with which the literature on Sri Lankan ritual has historically been more centrally concerned.

3.6 Theme 6: Feminization of Ritual Participation and Gendered Religious Authority

The interview data exhibit a clear and analytically significant gendered dimension in ritual participation that warrants specific theoretical attention. Across all three interviews, female agency and female-dominated attendance at ritual events was a recurring and independently corroborated observation.

3.6.1 Female-Dominated Ritual Attendance

P2 made an explicit and unprompted observation regarding the gender composition of those attending deity shrines and consulting his healing practice:

"Women predominantly — women come more."
— P2

This observation aligns with globally documented patterns of women's disproportionate engagement with healing rituals, spirit mediumship, and therapeutic religious practices (Boddy, 1994; Obeyesekere, 1981). In the Sinhala context specifically, women's predominant presence at kovil dana and shanthi karma events has been understood in relation to their primary household responsibility for the welfare and health of children, positioning women as the principal decision-makers in therapeutic resource allocation.

3.6.2 Female Informants and Domestic Ritual Knowledge

The female informants in this study (P1 and P3) demonstrated a depth and granularity of knowledge regarding domestic ritual procedures that exceeded what P2 described for community-level ceremonies. P1 could articulate the precise sequence of food items required for the tharaga devivo offering including specific measures of rice, pumpkin curry, and vegetable dishes as well as the community distribution protocols and the appropriate Esala month timing. P3 could specify in detail the exact offerings for kovil dana, the Ampere new year protocol including the panduru tying ceremony, and the post-birth milk-offering sequence.

This domestic ritual expertise constitutes a form of gendered religious authority that is routinely overlooked and undervalued in analyses focused on specialist male practitioners and the spectacular public domain of exorcism performance. The data suggest that even as large-scale ceremonial exorcism declines, women's embeddedness in household ritual maintains a denser, less visible, and potentially more resilient stratum of traditional practice that may prove considerably more resistant to modernizing pressures than the public ritual sphere.

3.6.3 Male Practitioner with Predominantly Female Clientele

P2 represents the canonical structure of Sinhala ritual authority: a male specialist serving a predominantly female lay clientele. His refusal to charge fees, his ethical self-presentation as a healer rather than a sorcerer, and his restriction to 'good' rituals (seth shanthi) position him as a figure of legitimate male spiritual authority whose credibility is reinforced precisely by its non-commercial character. This combination of genealogical transmission, ethical self-restraint, and fee-free practice places P2 within the normative structure of hereditary village healers described in classical Sinhala ethnography and documented by Kapferer (1983) and Obeyesekere (1981) for comparable contexts across rural Sri Lanka.

4. Discussion

4.1 Selective Preservation Rather Than Simple Decline

The empirical picture that emerges from the combined evidence of these three ethnographic interviews defies any reductive narrative of the simple 'disappearance' or uniform erosion of exorcism and related ritual practices. What is occurring in Pul Eliya is more accurately and theoretically productively characterized as selective preservation a complex process in which certain ritual elements are actively retained and maintained, others are allowed to decay through inattention and the failure of generational transmission, and the overall ritual system is progressively reframed in terms more compatible with the cosmological horizons of Buddhist modernism and secular education.

The large-scale public ceremonies thovil, bali arima, and the full planetary exorcism complex have effectively disappeared from active practice in the village. Their disappearance correlates with several mutually reinforcing structural factors: the loss of specialist practitioners equipped with the hereditary transmission necessary to perform these rituals competently; the increasing cost and logistical complexity of staging multi-day community spectacles in an era of economic individualization; the growing normative framing of such practices as superstitious within both Buddhist

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modernist and secular-rationalist discourse; and the expanding availability of biomedical alternatives for the acute illness conditions that previously most reliably triggered exorcism recourse.

In contrast, the smaller-scale, domestically embedded practices kovil dana, kiri vaturana, mutti namana, seth shanthi consultations, ilindari pirinsi appear to be maintaining meaningful functional viability. These practices share a cluster of structural characteristics that help explain their relative resilience: they are low in cost; they can be conducted privately without requiring community-level spectacle or specialist practitioners possessing rare hereditary knowledge; they are managed primarily by women within the household domain; and they are sufficiently compatible with Buddhist devotional practice (aadriya) that they can be reframed as orthodox rather than superstitious observance.

4.2 The Role of Buddhist Reframing

A consistent and theoretically significant thread running through all three interviews is the active embedding of traditional ritual practice within an explicitly Buddhist normative and cosmological framework. P2's repeated emphasis on Buddhist cosmology as the foundational context of his healing practice, and his placement of the Buddha at the apex of the deity hierarchy through whom all other spiritual powers are ultimately authorized, represents a strategic accommodation with Buddhist modernism rather than a site of incompatibility:

"Inevitably, with Buddha Samuduruwananse in the leading position — then it is to the Deviyo Samuduruwans that we bow." **— P2**

This hierarchical cosmological framing in which deity veneration is explicitly and ritually subordinated to the primacy of the Buddha and Buddhist ethics has been documented by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) as a long-standing and structurally important feature of Sinhala popular religion. Its presence in P2's account suggests that the Buddhist reformist critique of spirit practices has been partially internalized and absorbed into the practice itself, producing a hybrid cosmological form that simultaneously claims Buddhist legitimacy and maintains therapeutic efficacy in the spirit domain. This represents not capitulation to reform but a creative adaptation that expands rather than contracts the social reach of healing practice.

4.3 Medical Pluralism in Practice

The therapeutic trajectories documented across the three interviews illustrate medical pluralism not as a theoretical abstraction or an ideal-typical analytical construct, but as a lived navigational strategy employed daily by village households managing the ordinary challenges of health and misfortune. P1's simultaneous engagement with biomedical institutions and traditional healers; P2's explicit clinical demarcation of the conditions for which he refers patients to hospital; and P3's matter-of-fact integration of temple offerings into household health management all demonstrate the practical coexistence of multiple explanatory and therapeutic frameworks in a single community.

Importantly, this coexistence is not characterized by the simple progressive substitution of biomedicine for traditional practice a narrative that both development discourse and secularization theory have frequently assumed. Rather, the data reveal a dynamic apportioning of cases according to perceived aetiology: conditions attributed to supernatural causation are routed toward traditional specialists; acute physical conditions are directed to biomedical institutions; and chronic, treatment-resistant conditions may trigger ritual recourse as either a supplement or an alternative to biomedical care. This operational logic is precisely consistent with Kleinman's (1980) explanatory model framework, in which the community member's understanding of illness aetiology shapes and directs treatment-seeking behavior.

4.4 Theoretical Implications: Revisiting Leach's Legacy

The data presented in this article speak directly to the longitudinal and theoretically ambitious dimension of the study's research design. Leach's (1961) Pul Eliya documented a community in which animistic beliefs and ritual obligations were structurally embedded in the management of land, water, and social relations in which the cosmological and the material orders were, in the language of contemporary theoretical anthropology, mutually constitutive. The contemporary data reported here suggest that this structural embeddedness has been substantially, if incompletely, loosened: ritual observance is now considerably more individually and household-negotiated, less community-mandated, more dependent on private devotional choice, and more vulnerable to generational attrition.

Yet the persistence of deity veneration specifically and functionally tied to agricultural and hydrological concerns Pulleyar's guardianship of the village fields and irrigation tank; the koal atta ellima ceremony at the inauguration of the cultivation season; the biannual kiri uthurana linked to the paddy harvest — suggests that the deepest structural linkages between cosmology and subsistence ecology identified by Leach retain some meaningful residual force. Perhaps the most precise characterization of the transformation underway is from obligation to option — a fundamental shift in the social status of ritual from collectively enforced communal practice to individually elected expression of personal and household devotion.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

This study should be interpreted in light of its qualitative and exploratory scope. In particular, the principal thematic

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analysis is based on three purposively selected key informants (P1, P2, and P3). Although these participants provide complementary and information-rich perspectives on traditional healing, ritual practice, and intergenerational religious change, the small informant base limits the breadth and transferability of the findings and does not permit the views presented here to be treated as representative of the entire Pul Eliya community. The focus group discussions and participant observation provided additional contextual and triangulating evidence, but the findings should nevertheless be understood as an in-depth ethnographic interpretation rather than a comprehensive community-wide account. Future research involving younger residents, Buddhist religious practitioners, additional traditional specialists, and a larger range of households would strengthen the comparative and generational dimensions of the analysis.

5. Conclusion

This article has presented a qualitative anthropological analysis of changing exorcism beliefs and ritual practices in Pul Eliya, drawing primarily on three in-depth ethnographic interviews and supplementary contextual evidence from focus group discussions and participant observation.

Within the scope of the available ethnographic material, six principal themes emerged from the analysis. The key findings of the study may be summarized as follows. First, large-scale exorcism ceremonies thovil and bali have undergone structural collapse in Pul Eliya, driven principally by the loss of hereditary practitioner transmission, rising material costs, and the normative influence of Buddhist modernism and secular rationalism operating through formal education and mass media. Second, smaller-scale healing and devotional practices persist robustly, particularly those that are manageable within the household domain and reframeable as Buddhist-compatible devotion rather than animistic superstition. Third, a pervasive pattern of contested but non-rejecting engagement with efficacy characterizes lay interaction with traditional healing neither wholesale acceptance nor wholesale rejection, but case-by-case pragmatic evaluation rooted in specific personal and community experience. Fourth, intergenerational epistemological rupture is proceeding under the influence of formal education, mass media, and rural-urban migration, but remains incomplete and is being actively negotiated by older women who maintain both practice and intentional transmission strategies. Fifth, the local deity pantheon particularly Pulleyar Devivo, Aiyyanayake Devivo, and Ilindari Devivo retains functional relevance in agricultural and therapeutic contexts, maintaining a stratum of cosmological continuity beneath the more visible decline of spectacular public exorcism. Sixth, and theoretically importantly, women constitute the primary agents of ritual maintenance in the village, a finding with significant implications for the gendered analysis of religious change, cultural transmission, and the domestic household as a site of cosmological reproduction.

These findings contribute substantively to ongoing scholarly debates in the anthropology of South Asian religion, medical pluralism, and Buddhist modernism. They suggest that the transformation of ritual life in communities such as Pul Eliya is best understood not through the lens of secularization theory or simple cultural loss, but as a complex and internally differentiated reconfiguration of the relationships among cosmology, therapy, ecology, and social obligation that constitute the living religion of rural Sri Lanka.

Future research should extend the interview sample to include younger community members, Buddhist monk's resident in the village, and practitioners from adjacent settlements. The comparative analysis of Pul Eliya with other North Central Province communities that have undergone comparable socio-economic transformations would be especially productive. Such an extended research programme would permit more precise theoretical adjudication between those accounts of Sri Lankan religious change that emphasize convergence toward a Buddhist modernist orthodoxy and those that highlight the persistent, adaptive, and creative dimensions of popular religious life in the island's rural communities.

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